

Prioritizing Federal Spending on Disease Research
Research Funding on Major Diseases Not Proportionate to Needs of Taxpayers
by Rep. Ernest Istook (R-Okla.)

Federal funding for medical research is skewed, failing to focus on those diseases which cause the most suffering and death in America.

Something is wrong when National Institutes of Health (NIH) funds research at the rate of \$1,129 per heart disease death, \$723 per stroke death, \$4,995 per diabetes death, \$4,525 per cancer death, but at \$31,381 per HIV/AIDS death. NIH spends \$11.15 per each \$1,000 spent on medical care for heart disease, \$6.18 for stroke, \$3.20 for diabetes, \$77.13 for cancer, but \$125.87 per \$1,000 in medical care spent for HIV/AIDS.

NIH priorities seem to respond well to the political and media attention focused upon AIDS and HIV. However, its priorities fall short when compared to which diseases cause the most death or the most suffering, or when compared to which generate the most expense to the largest number of Americans (or the most expense to taxpayers, via government health programs.)

By numbers of patients, rather than number of deaths, NIH allocates \$2,100 per year for each HIV/AIDS patient (600,000-700,000 of them), \$200 per breast cancer patient (2-million of them), \$338 per overall cancer patient (8-million of them), \$40 per heart disease patient (22-million of them), and \$20 per diabetes patient (16-million of them).

Of the 43% of its budget that NIH spends on disease-specific research, heart disease receives \$903 million (16.5% of all disease research funding), diabetes \$316 million (5.8%),

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pneumonia & influenza \$64 million (1.2%), stroke \$127 million (2.3%), and HIV/AIDS \$1.5 billion (27.5%).

As the American Heart Association reports, cardiovascular diseases have been America's #1 killer for over 75 years, nearing 1-million deaths per year. According to the National Center for Health Statistics, cardiovascular disease deaths are 22 times higher than AIDS (which is #8). Cancer is the #2 killer, with the number of deaths 13 times higher than AIDS. Stroke is the #3 killer, four times higher than AIDS. But NIH's \$1.5 billion in AIDS research is second only to cancer's \$2.7 billion. Although media coverage of AIDS stresses reports that it is the leading cause of death for males ages 25-44, this selected segment is only 15% of the entire population. Overall, AIDS drops to the #8 cause of death, which is significant, but is still only a small fraction of the deaths caused by America's biggest killer diseases.

We absolutely should provide significant funding for AIDS research. It is a horrible and deadly disease. But it nevertheless is only one of many horrible and deadly diseases.

Although Congress appropriates funding to NIH on an institute-by-institute basis, it gives great discretion over specific research-funding allocations to the institute directors and in particular to the director of NIH.

Congress has a constitutional duty to insure that tax dollars are spent properly and to set policy. The money which funds NIH comes not just from the 600,000-700,000 people afflicted with HIV/AIDS, but the many, many millions more who must deal with many other horrible diseases. They also deserve to be remembered.

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